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Interview: KeHE President and CEO Discusses Company Rebranding

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By Robyn Pforr Ryan

At a 10:30 speech to the trade this morning, KeHE Distributors' president and CEO Brandon Barnholt unveiled a rebranding for the company. Going forward, KeHE Distributors, LLC, will be the sole company name in the U.S. with a new "one earth" logo that symbolizes the company's focus on three distinct product lines: natural, specialty and fresh.



"What we hope to convey to retailers is that we are simply one mark, one brand, one group of people," said Barnholt in an interview with the Specialty Food Association. "With this rebranding, nothing else is going to change for retailers. Our day-to-day operations and mission remain the same. Our job is to be excellent in every one of these channels and for every customer."

Barnholt unveiled the KeHE rebranding at the company's KeHE's annual Holiday Show, held at McCormick Place in Chicago. The new One Earth logo—a globe-shaped coming together of three distinctly colored swooshes—reflects the company's realization that it comprises three main product areas, Barnholt said. The yellow leaf swoosh represents its fresh products, including 9,000 items. The green swoosh represents KeHE's natural and organic offerings, totaling more than 37,000 products. "Kind of a shocking number," Barnholt added. And the blue-gridded swoosh represents the global nature of its specialty product offerings, totaling 21,000 items, he said.

In all, the privately held KeHE Distributors, Romeoville, Ill., represents 68,000 items from 5,000 brands and distributes them to more than 30,000 retail outlets in North America. Founded in 1952, KeHE has nine distribution facilities in the United States and three in Canada. Starting today, all KeHE collateral material and its website will reflect the new logo.

"Today we are fully capable of helping retailers in almost every area of their store, particularly around the perimeter. We hope this logo paints that image and perhaps even will create a new appreciation for what we do," Barnholt said.

As part of the rebranding, KeHE is retiring the Tree of Life name for its natural and organic products distribution in the United States, but not in Canada, where Tree of Life will remain the company's name-brand identity. In the U.S., KeHE will continue to use the Tree of Life name solely on its proprietary line of natural and organic food products sold into U.S. natural food stores.

The rebranding, one year in the making, marks the third anniversary of KeHE's purchase of Tree of Life, the large natural/organic food distributor based in St. Augustine, for \$190 million. Barnholt said the company marked this milestone with a strategy and plan review. "It was more than a refresh; it was almost a start from scratch," he said.

"What happens when you put together two companies of equal size, is you have a period of heavy consolidation and integration and finally you come out on the other side," Barnholt said. "It was clear who we were and where our company could go. We hope this logo creates new appreciation for what we do: bringing together these three product categories from all over the world."

With the rebranding, KeHE is dropping the Peter's Import name for its 6,500 products catering to niche/specialty shops. KeHE purchased Peter's Imports, Grandville, Mich., in September 2010 and, until today, had been using the brand name for the products sold to gift shops, basket packets, florists, restaurants, vintners and other niche outlets. Additionally, KeHE is dropping the Source! name for its growing division of about 10,000 vitamins, minerals, supplements and personal care products.

Lots of changes have been in the works at KeHE. In early August, KeHE will move its Natural Products Industry team (established in February and now with five professionals working in a temporary space) into its new headquarters in Boulder, Colo. The company chose Boulder as the team's location "to take advantage of the Boulder community's rich talent base and deep roots in the natural products industry," Barnholt said in a follow-up email.

Earlier this spring, KeHE announced its plans to significantly expand its freezer and cooler warehouse space in four facilities—Dallas, Ft. Lauderdale and St. Augustine, Fla., and Romeoville, Ill.—to keep up with the rapid growth in its fresh and frozen product categories.

"There have been a lot of changes in our industry with the downturn in the economy and the consumer response to that," Barnholt said. "We've become more of an eating culture than a shopping culture. Retailers have to be even more vigilant about being on trend. We at KeHE have fared very well with these changes. Our mission is helping retailers be relevant and to make it easy for them."

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